



PASK

THE RUNAWAY

'The people of the Middle Ages didn't use our months of January, February, et cetera, but marked time by the feast days of the church.

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I don't know when I ran away. But it was past Eastertide, and before Lammas. Lammas to Michaelmas, and Michaelmas to Christmas. Christmas, Lent, and Easter. It must be nearly a year.¹ Once I've lived in town a year and a day, I'll be free. That's the law.

The worst is over. This past winter, I don't know which was worse, the hunger or the cold. But I knew I would never go back.

My father used to say he wished he'd run away when he was young and had no wife and children. "Once there's mouths to feed," he'd say to me, "you're a slave for life. You work till you drop down dead, just to feed your children." But he never did feed us. It wasn't his fault—a villein only gets what the lord lets him keep, and our lord was tightfisted. Then there was sickness, and my parents died. And I ran away.

I wish I'd kept count of the days since I left. Once I'm free, I can start looking for work. Town work, the kind where you get money, instead of old cabbage leaves and the dregs of the beer. I'll get someone to teach me to make barrels or rope or meat pies. That'd be the best, to work around food.

Someday I'm going to buy me one of those meat pies—one that's hot—and eat the whole thing, all at once. And someday I'll buy new clothes. When winter

comes, I'll have shoes on my feet instead of rags and straw. And when it's harvest time, I'll go to the fair and buy a blue ribbon for the girl who works up at the kennels.

She was kind to me last winter. I'd been thieving and doing odd jobs, but the snow had been falling three days and everyone was within. There was nothing to steal and no work to be had. I took shelter in the kennel with the dogs. That's where she found me. She came in with the dog's food, and the hounds jumped up baying, and I huddled by the wall, in the shadows.

But she saw me. The dogs were 'round her, barking, but she looked past them to where I sat shivering. She came over and dipped her hand in the dog's bucket, and held out a handful of porridge. I was so hungry I snatched her hand and gobbled, same as if I was a dog. I gulped down the dog's food and sucked her fingers, and she gave me more. And even as I was eating, I knew how queer it all was, but I didn't care. She was a stranger and stank of dog, but I licked her palm as if it were a golden plate.

She let me stay till the weather thawed. I kept out of sight as best I could. From time to time she gave me something to eat. She told me the names of the dogs. She loves the puppies best—her hands were covered with tooth marks. She looks a bit like a pup herself—she has shaggy hair, and it hangs in her eyes and flops down to her shoulders. Like ears.

Someday I'll go back to her. I'll wear new clothes, and I'll go to the kennels and tell her I'm free. Not a villain, not a vagabond. A free man. And I'll give her a piece of ribbon—blue as her eyes—so she can make herself pretty and tie back her hair.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND TOWNS AND FREEDOM

"Town air makes men free." The proverb has come down to us from medieval times. It is important to remember that the vast majority of people in the Middle Ages were farmers with a limited amount of land. They lived in what we would consider desperate poverty, and they were dependent on the whims of the weather and the good will of their lord.

That being said, not all villeins were as unfortunate as Pask's father. If a villein inherited enough strips of land to support his family, or if he was lucky enough to serve an honest and generous lord, he might live in relative comfort. A villein's fate depended on the land he worked and the temperament of the lord he served. Pask's father was unlucky on both counts.

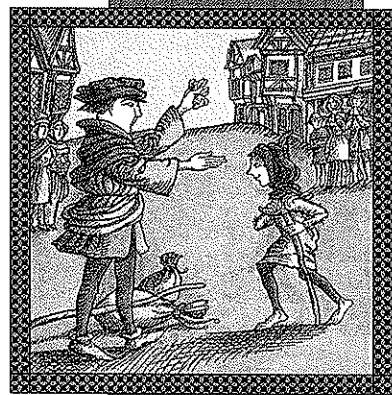
During the late Middle Ages, the world was changing: towns were growing, and more people were making a living by trade. These townsmen enjoyed a degree of freedom that was unknown to their country cousins. If a townsman suspected that the local miller was cheating him, he could take his flour to another mill. If a shoemaker's shoes were not bringing in enough money, he could make better ones—or cheaper ones—or bellow out the virtues of his shoes in a louder voice.

A villein who ran away and lived in town for a year and a day gained his freedom. This was a bold step to take: it meant risking the lord's pursuit, and losing contact with everything that was familiar. Though Pask has been lucky this far, he may find it difficult to obtain the kind of skilled work he desires. A baker, cooper, or rope maker usually started his career as an apprentice, which meant that the master who taught him had to be paid.



GILES

THE BEGGAR



Good masters, sweet ladies!
I am Giles the beggar,
the best of my trade!
Behold my crushed foot!
The sight of the wound
would sicken your stomach, and soften your heart.
A penny? A farthing?
I grovel for mercy —
sometimes I manage real tears.
(It's an art.)

No takers? No givers?
Not even a morsel?
Ah! They are stone to my pitiful cries.
And so I am left to my wits, which in fact
are prodigiously keen and surpassingly wise:

I enter a town, with my crutch and my cry:
"Food for the famished! Alms for the poor!"
I stagger, collapse in the dust of the road!
I swoon — too exhausted to go one step more —

and here comes my father! (But I do not know him.)
I lie by the roadside, starting to wail.

People of the Middle Ages were fascinated by relics. Most people believed that a fragment from a saint's body could work miracles.

My father, the peddler, the dealer in relics:¹
"Ten pence for a thread from Saint Margaret's veil!
Who covets the thumbnail of Martin of Tours?
Or this—better still—even this can be yours!

A flask of the healing holy water—
stand back, now—don't push, don't jostle—
flask of the sacred holy water
used on the feet of Saint James, Apostle!"

Sometimes they pay. More often they don't
so he throws up his hands and he sighs—like that.
"Oh, ye of no faith! Before you, I swear
I will cure, here and now, this unfortunate brat!"

That's my cue. So I whimper.

He opens the flask,
anoints me, while I seem to faint,
with the authentic holy water
used on the feet of the holy saint.

I swoon in his arms. Look upward! Cry out!

(Now see how the peasants step forward and gawk.)

"Angels! Apostles! I see them before me!"

I throw down my crutch, clasp my hands, and I *walk*!

(My father and I

rehearsed this for hours—

miracles have to look perfectly natural.)

"He walks! Praise God and His saints! He walks!"

If I do it just right,

the crowd gasps aloud—

they genuflect, weep,
stretch their hands out, and touch.
And while they are paying
for drops of that water,
I gather my bandages,
pick up my crutch.
My pantomime's done
once the money is paid.
I creep out of town.
I feel guilt —
but not much.

Later my father
follows the highroad.
We meet, and he gives me
my supper, my pay:
bread or an apple,
cabbages, turnips —
sometimes there's sausages
on a good day.

We sup by the road,
ask Our Lord to look after us:
"Send us more fools
for our food and our keep.
Forgive us our trespasses,
pardon our lies;
look after your foxes
as well as your sheep."

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